

# L'immagine dell'Italia nelle letterature angloamericane e postcoloniali

*a cura di Paolo Bertinetti*

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In copertina: Il golfo di Napoli in un acquarello dallo *Sketchbook* di Lady Augusta Gregory (1900)

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## NEW SLAVERIES IN ITALY: ANGLOPHONE PERSPECTIVES

*Pietro Deandrea*

What haunts him is those he never learns about: the refugees who are known to have drowned in these stretches of water, whose names are never recorded and whose bodies are never found<sup>1</sup>.

In recent years I have been researching into the literature and visual arts concerned with new forms of slavery in Britain, i.e. those exploited and enslaved migrants produced by globalisation since the early 1990s, be they economic migrants (both documented and undocumented), asylum seekers or refugees. In many contemporary novels, plays, films and photographs on this issue I identify two key images – the ghost and the concentration camp, which are analysed from the twin perspective of postcolonial and Holocaust studies<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> C. MOOREHEAD, *Human Cargo: A Journey among Refugees*, London, Vintage, 2006 (2005), p. 54; the words are by Rino Gagliano, Captain of the Italian coast-guard.

<sup>2</sup> P. DEANDREA, *Human bondage in contemporary UK and its generic transformations: From Bridget Anderson's Britain's Secret Slaves to Ruth Rendell's Simisola and Kazuo Ishiguro's Never Let Me Go*, in V. Cavone, C. Corti, M. Trulli (eds), *Forms of Migration, Migration of Forms: Literature*, Bari, Progedit, 2009, pp. 402-417; *Unravelling unpersons: Inscribing the voices of contemporary slavery in the UK*, in "Textus", XXII:3 (2009) ("Marginal Textualities", ed. by C. Dente and S. Orgel), pp. 665-680; *Contemporary slavery in the UK and its categories*, in A. Oboe and F. Giommi (eds), *Black Arts in Contemporary Britain: Literary, Visual, Performative*, Rome, Aracne, 2012, pp. 175-193; *Shards in the landscape: The dispersed liminality of contemporary slavery in the UK*, in H. Andrews and L. Roberts (eds), *Liminal Landscapes: Travel, Experience and Spaces In-between*, London and New York, Routledge, 2012, pp. 216-233; *Foreign devils: Visualising the spectres of contemporary British slavery in Nick Broomfield's Ghosts*, in C. Spooner and F. Botting (eds), *Gothic Bastards: Genre, Innovation and Contemporary Fictions*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, forthcoming; *The spectralized camp: Cultural representations of British new slaveries*, in "Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies", forthcoming.

The topic of British new slaveries raises questions regarding the boundaries and limits of postcolonial studies, given that, in several cases, the authors analysed do not come from former colonies or colonised peoples, and even the enslaved subjects in their writings originate from areas that are not a product of the history of the British Empire<sup>3</sup>. This is to be seen as part and parcel of the discussion around the renewal of postcolonial studies. Important collections of essays have recently explored many facets of this debate, measuring the redefinition of postcolonial studies against globalisation and related issues. These books often emphasise the political urgency of postcolonial studies “as a critical strain posed within and against, as well as antecedent to, dominant notions of globalization”<sup>4</sup>. Some of their contributors focus on the underprivileged subjects produced by globalisation<sup>5</sup>, and in this essay I intend to follow an analogous path.

Given this inevitable interplay between postcolonialism and globalisation, one constant paradox underlying the study of British new slaveries has to do with focusing on a national context (Britain) while dealing with texts opening on an international horizon. This is why I have often come across Italy as an important presence in this scenario. The reflections that follow focus on the ways in which Italy is envisioned in anglophone writings and visual works, within the wider frame of new slaveries. They single out some recurrent images associated with Italy: the gate, the limbo and the street. I also attempt to see how these images connect with the key tropes emerging from the study of *British* new slaveries – the ghost and the camp. This analysis focuses on a film (Winterbottom’s *In This World*), a drama serial written by the playwright Abi Morgan (*Sex Traffic*) and some investigative publications on the topic (in some cases by Italian authors, too).

<sup>3</sup> P. DEANDREA, *Contemporary slavery in the UK*, pp. 180-181.

<sup>4</sup> A. LOOMBA, S. KAUL, M. BUNZL, A. BURTON and J. ESTY, *Beyond what? An introduction*, in Loomba, Kaul, Bunzl, Burton and Esty, *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2005, p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, S. GIKANDI, *Between roots and routes: Cosmopolitanism and the claims of locality*, and P. WILLIAMS, *Outlines of a better world: Rerouting postcolonialism*, in J. Wilson, C. Sandru and S. Lawson-Welsh (eds), *Rerouting the Postcolonial: New Directions for the New Millennium*, London and New York, Routledge, 2010, passim.

Italy is sometimes employed by traffickers to entice their victims, as a sort of promised land, the gate to another, less indigent life, only to disappear when the real journey is completed. Anna from Moldova, for instance, says “They took us to Bosnia and then to Serbia, and they just kept telling us we were on the way to Italy”<sup>6</sup>. Italy as a dream, then, becomes a deathly nightmare for its victims: in her vicissitudes across Eastern Europe, Anna (a former sexual slave) is depicted by Louisa Waugh as a shattered human being (“She seems to enter almost an hypnotic state of shock as she moves her stories back and forth between countries”) and expresses her dehumanisation thus: “By then I had lost count of how many men had bought and sold me. I had been traded like a dead body, and I felt as though I was dead by then”<sup>7</sup>.

In other cases Italy can represent a literal land of passage to a wished-for destination somewhere else, further north. Clare Bayley’s play *The Container* (2007) and Michael Winterbottom’s film *In This World* (2002) represent two cases in point. *The Container* is about a group of undocumented migrants being transported in a truck driving to Britain; at the beginning, when the characters have no idea of their whereabouts, a newly-arrived Afghan woman tells them they are in the north of Italy, near the French border<sup>8</sup>. The play is also designed to be performed in an actual truck container: sitting against its inside walls, extremely close to the actors and their suffering, immersed in total darkness except for the torchlights handled by the characters during the performance, members of the audience are offered an empathic feeling of how constraining and claustrophobic such an ordeal must be<sup>9</sup>. In my previous research I underline precisely how, among the wide range of new shapes into which the concentration camp has metamorphosed for Britain’s new slaves (homes, flats, factories, cultivated fields, greenhouses, beaches, detention centres, restaurants, etc.), one should include the very means of

<sup>6</sup> L. WAUGH, *Selling Olga: Stories of Human Trafficking and Resistance*, London, Phoenix, 2007 (2006), p. 33. See also a similar case about a Chinese migrant ensnared by the criminal organisation known as the snakeheads: “I came to Britain by mistake”; R. GUPTA, *Enslaved: The New British Slavery*, London, Portobello, 2007, pp. 143, 165, 172.

<sup>7</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 33, 37. In spite of all this, the poverty back home in Moldova is so harsh that she declares “If I had another \$ 500, I would try again [to make it to Italy]” (33).

<sup>8</sup> C. BAYLEY, *The Container*, London, Nick Hern, 2007, p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> P. DEANDREA, *Contemporary slavery in the UK*, pp. 173-176.

transportation carrying them to Britain: “mobile prisons within a foreign landscape”, as Yosefa Loshitzky calls them in her study on cinema<sup>10</sup>.

The one movie where this is most evident in relation to Italy is Winterbottom and Grisoni’s *In This World*. In an accomplished mockumentary style<sup>11</sup>, the movie follows the journey of the young boy Jamal from a refugee camp in Pakistan through Iran, Turkey, Italy, France and finally to London. He employs all sorts of means of transportation and travels in many different ways, including long treks. The move from Turkey to Italy takes place in a truck container loaded onto a ship, producing an effect quite close to the performance of *The Container*: in an almost total darkness with flashes of light<sup>12</sup>, Jamal and his fellow stowaways spend more than forty-eight terrifying hours in an airless, crammed space, frustratingly helpless in the face of a baby constantly crying. When all of them start to feel unwell, their shouts for help are useless. At their arrival in Trieste, when the Italian traffickers open the back of the truck, only Jamal and the baby have survived. This is where haunting first comes into play, together with the spectral tropes related to it: during the rest of his voyage, Jamal continues to hear the stifled cries of those deceased, after the Italian traffickers are left to deal with the corpses and the crying baby.

When it comes to the haunting traces left by deceased migrants in Italy, of course, one’s thoughts inevitably go to the huge number of people trying to cross the Adriatic and Mediterranean seas. The image of people amassed on and inside boats in bad repair, enveloped in utter

<sup>10</sup>Y. LOSHITZKY, *Screening Strangers: Migration and Diaspora in Contemporary European Cinema*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 2010, p. 17.

<sup>11</sup> M. WINTERBOTTOM (director) and T. GRISONI (script), *In This World*, Film Consortium and BBC Films, in association with Film Council. It was awarded the Golden Bear at the Berlin Festival. For an analysis of its stylistic features and content, see S. HELFF, *Scapes of refuge in multicultural Britain: Representing refugees in digital docudrama and mockumentary*, pp. 287-289, and K.-A. TAN, “If you’re not on paper, you don’t exist”: Depictions of illegal immigration and asylum in film: On Michael Winterbottom’s *In This World* (2002) and *Code 46* (2003), pp. 304-307, both in L. Eckstein, B. Korte, E.U. Pirker and C. Reinhardt (eds), *Multi-Ethnic Britain 2000+: New Perspectives in Literature, Film and the Arts*, Amsterdam and New York, Rodopi, 2008. For a wider perspective on Winterbottom’s movies on migration issues, see Y. LOSHITZKY, *Screening Strangers*, pp. 117-141.

<sup>12</sup> “Filmed in nightshot, where the light eerily illuminates one character at a time”; K.-A. TAN, *If you’re not on paper*, p. 306.



darkness, is easily comparable to the containers commented on above, and unfortunately followed, too often, by tragic mass drownings due to shipwrecks or to traffickers throwing migrants into the sea<sup>13</sup>. Caroline Moorehead's investigations on world refugees (while covering Egypt, Mexico, Australia, Britain, Guinea, Lebanon, Afghanistan and Sudan) significantly start from Sicily and from one such shipwreck<sup>14</sup>. Her interviews focus on a boat of Liberian migrants that floundered against the rocks of Realmonte, near Agrigento, on 14 September 2002, when ninety-five people were saved and at least thirty-five died. Here, too, some key images mentioned above return. The migrants are described as struggling to hold on to the rocks in the dark, while waiting for help from the astonished locals, most of whom were expecting to spend a Saturday night on a beach bar dance floor. The stark contrast between tourists and migrants points again to the misleading vision of Italy and Europe as a promised land, and developed some disquieting reactions: in the following days, the migrants' belongings washed ashore were carried away because "it was felt that they looked bad for the tourists", and "the scurrilous local *La Sicilia*" published a cartoon "showing a peddleboat with two tourists, corpses floating by their side, under the words '*turismo macabro*'"<sup>15</sup>.

Moorehead's first-hand witnesses, a local couple whose house faces the beach, are poignantly described as deeply marked by what they saw: one of them says that "she will never eat fish again". One ambulance driver is "*haunted* by the memory of a very young girl brought to shore already dead, clinging so tightly to her sole possession, a small handbag, that her fingers could not be prised loose from its handle" (*italics mine*)<sup>16</sup>. What Moorehead brings to the fore here represents, in embryo, a nationwide phenomenon. If we assume, following Abdelmalek Sayad, that immigration constitutes the core of our (usually unspoken) social unconscious<sup>17</sup>, isn't it inevitable to think of Italy as haunted by all the

<sup>13</sup> Two such cases, concerning Eastern European sexually enslaved women trying to cross the Adriatic sea, are shown in the drama serial *Sex Traffic* (see below).

<sup>14</sup> Apart from a Prologue on Cairo and a first historical chapter; C. MOOREHEAD, *Human Cargo*, pp. 43-63.

<sup>15</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 45, 46.

<sup>16</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 47, 46.

<sup>17</sup> A. SAYAD, *La doppia pena del migrante: Riflessioni sul pensiero di stato*, in "Aut aut" 275 (1996), p. 10, quoted in A. STAUD, *Le nostre braccia: Meticcio e antropologia delle nuove schiavitù*, Milan, Agenzia X, 2011, p. 51.

migrants who die while trying to reach our borders?<sup>18</sup>

The significance of Moorehead's pages on Sicily also lies in her investigations and reflections on the aftermath of that tragedy, which point to the second key image of this essay: Italy as a state of limbo. Some of the rescued migrants were hosted in the village of San Biagio Platani, on the mountains above Agrigento. They were welcomed warmly and given accommodation, Italian lessons and small jobs ("though none could be officially employed"), while waiting for their asylum applications to be completed. Nevertheless, "the warm relationship between the locals and their Liberian guests seemed to turn a little sour", until most of them left the village:

They are not content, It is as if the long wait to reach Europe has *once again* had to be extended; and this last wait, until they can set out for a life somewhere better, more interesting, more promising, more like the Europe they had imagined, is almost unbearable. [... This place] has become just *another* state of limbo<sup>19</sup>. (italics mine)

Moorehead hints at Italy being one of the final points of a chain of limbos, of waiting locations ("once again", "another"), without specifying its most probable previous points: the months-long journey through Western and Northern African countries (Mali, Niger, Libya) and the crossing of deserts in unbearable conditions, with many victims already left behind. In a feat of impressive investigative journalism, the Italian reporter Fabrizio Gatti travelled these routes and spoke with many West African migrants waiting at similar limbo points. He came across individuals who had been beaten and tortured, sometimes interned, by soldiers and police, left in some desert station without money and therefore without the possibility to continue their journey or

<sup>18</sup> For specific data, see L. RASTELLO, *La frontiera addosso: Così si deportano i diritti umani*, Bari, Laterza, 2010, pp. 59-61. Concerning what might be haunting Italy's social and political unconscious, one should also include the many forms of co-operation with Libya on issues of migration, which also meant sending back migrants to be persecuted or to die in a country with no respect for human rights; see L. FEKETE, *A Suitable Enemy: Racism, Migration and Islamophobia in Europe*, London and New York, Pluto, 2009, pp. 152-154; F. GATTI, *Bilal: Viaggiare, lavorare, morire da clandestini*, Milan, BUR, 2008 (2007), pp. 233, 265, 272-274, 285-287, 303-306, 461-481.

<sup>19</sup> C. MOOREHEAD, *Human Cargo*, pp. 58-61.

to travel back home. From his conversations with Ghanaian, Liberian and Nigerian migrants, he adopted one of their most frequently mentioned words, an English term associated to the limbo state: “stranded”. He describes this condition as a splitting of mind and body, where the mind is projected towards one’s country of destination and the body cannot help but stay still. As one migrant tells him, when you are stranded you are worse than dead, because, unlike a corpse, you can still see and feel, and therefore you suffer<sup>20</sup>.

It is again, I would add, a form of spectralising dehumanisation, that can help us contextualise and better understand the apparently strange behaviour narrated by Moorehead about these migrants in Sicily. Faced with lengthy and unreliable procedures, feeling trapped and let down by the system, many leave “to *disappear* into Italy’s vast black economy, or to drift northwards illegally into other European countries”<sup>21</sup>. (italics mine) The second option takes us back to the image of Italy as a gate of passage, commented on above. The first, with (again) obvious spectralising implications, is rendered very effectively in the film *In This World*: after the truck is opened and all its dead bodies come to light, Jamal runs away along the roads of a vast industrial area, and Winterbottom’s camera distances itself until Jamal is a tiny running figure swallowed by open spaces. The next scene takes us straight into Trieste, where Jamal is selling trinkets to passers-by, at times being chased out of public places, a minor abandoned to his own destiny.

Another variant of limbo state is represented in the drama serial *Sex Traffic*, written by Abi Morgan and based on factual research<sup>22</sup>. After having been sexually trafficked to Sarajevo with the promise of a legal job in London, Elena Visinescu from Moldova attempts the crossing of the Adriatic Sea with her sister, but she is thrown overboard as a decoy against the Italian coast-guards. Once rescued, she is taken to a trafficked women’s refuge centre in Lecce. The home is run with the best intentions and humanity, but it does not seem to offer anything beyond security within its bounds: the women’s former pimps freely stand

<sup>20</sup> F. GATTI, *Bilal*, pp. 82-84.

<sup>21</sup> C. MOOREHEAD, *Human Cargo*, p. 56.

<sup>22</sup> A. MORGAN, *Sex Traffic*, directed by D. YATES, a Granada Television / Big Motion Pictures production for Channel 4 and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2006. Winner of eight BAFTA Awards.

outside its gate to threaten or entice them back, and when they discuss the possibility of testifying against their traffickers, the obvious conclusion is that they cannot do it, because their families back home would be in danger.

Both Jamal and Elena seem, to put it simply, let down by the Italian – not to mention the international – political and legal system, and cannot see a real change in their lives, but only a temporary lull in their suffering. It is extremely significant, then, that both resort to going *against* the law in order to break the stalemate they find themselves in: Jamal steals a handbag and thus pays his fare to France and then London<sup>23</sup>, while Elena escapes the women's refuge and approaches the pimps so that she can re-join her sister (here too, in London)<sup>24</sup>. Andrea Staid's research, supported by his interviews with migrants, emphasises a similar lack of alternative options; in the words of Marc from Ecuador:

Certe volte invece penso che l'unico modo per tirare su qualche soldo vero sia quello di mettermi in affari... Non so se mi capisci, nel senso fare qualcosa che in breve tempo mi faccia trovare i soldi per andarmene, tanto cosa devo fare se mi fermano ancora? [...] Ma è una scelta difficile e non sono sicuro di volerla fare, se lo sapesse mia moglie che ci sto solo pensando... Ma è anche difficile guadagnare 3 euro all'ora, è ingiusto. Nel mio paese potrei lamentarmi e chiedere di più, ma qua come faccio o dico di sì o non mi fanno lavorare e io non posso non lavorare<sup>25</sup>.

Staid therefore reflects on the illogical workings of a context exacerbated by a legislation (the infamous Bossi-Fini) designed to spread illegality and create a mass of blackmailed labourers ready to accept any working condition:

<sup>23</sup> Remaining stuck in the Italian black economy, after all, might turn out to be another form of limbo, as one migrant exploited in the agricultural sector says: "Sono stanco. Dopo anni, è come se fosse ancora il mio primo giorno in Italia. Qui io ho trovato condizioni peggiori del Senegal. Non riesco nemmeno a mandare aiuti a casa. Non appena posso, me ne vado. Ma per andar via, amico mio, servono soldi." (F. GATTI, *Bilal*, p. 449).

<sup>24</sup> On Italy functioning as a base for traffickers taking their victims to Britain, see L. WAUGH, *Selling Olga*, pp. 89, 155.

<sup>25</sup> A. STAID, *Le nostre braccia*, pp. 148-149.

dato un calcolo di costi e benefici, il migrante irregolare dovrebbe essere razionalmente portato a delinquere; ciò che lo frena sono riferimenti morali, normativi, religiosi. La conclusione sconcertante porta a riflettere sul fatto che, posto di fronte alle due alternative, la scelta di delinquere ricadrebbe nella sfera razionale, la scelta di non farlo, invece, ricade in quella irrazionale<sup>26</sup>.

Even more illogically, in some cases, the Italian limbo is not necessarily overcome when one manages to leave for another European country. Under the Dublin regulations, asylum seekers' cases are to be processed in the country where their fingerprints were first taken<sup>27</sup>. This generated the coinage of an Italian word indicating migrants bounced back to a limbo condition in Italy: "dublinati"<sup>28</sup>.

The third key image selected by the present essay is the street. My research on British new slaveries often concentrates on the private dimension of homes and flats, where migrant domestic and sexual workers are imprisoned. In her worldwide field investigations, Louisa Waugh could not help noticing this manifest difference from Italy:

In Italy, I saw sex foreign workers lining the streets. It is heavily ironic that the country that has the most comprehensive provisions for trafficked women and other severely exploited migrants in Europe also has one of the Continent's most blatantly visible sex industries. From Trieste to Palermo thousands of women are on the streets every night selling sex to unpredictable male punters. It's a minority of women who work off street in private premises<sup>29</sup>.

Waugh, too, reminds us of the flaws of our system, and that biased regulations are only one part of the problem in a country where applying laws often appears a formidable challenge. This ambiguity and double-sidedness of the Italian context is paralleled by Fabrizio Gatti's

<sup>26</sup> *Ini*, p. 67.

<sup>27</sup> G. GODIO, *I numeri*, in L. Rastello, *La frontiera addosso*, pp. 172-176.

<sup>28</sup> B. MAFFEO, *L'odissea dei "dublinati"*, in "Il manifesto" 21/1/2014, p. 12.

<sup>29</sup> L. WAUGH, *Selling Olga*, p. 126. In Waugh's book, flats are described as the place where the worst kinds of sexual exploitation take place (by one social worker), or as a liberation from the dangers of the streets (by one former prostitute who experienced both); see pp. 107, 124.

description of Treviso, where the (later re-elected) mayor removed all public benches to eliminate a place for immigrants to sit and rest:

Treviso è la cartolina di un'Europa ordinata. Pulita. Legale. Per vedere la sua seconda faccia, basta aspettare qualche ora. Il tempo che il sole tramonti e scenda la notte. Le strade che portano alla città senza panchine si riempiono di ragazze. Due ogni cinquanta, cento metri. Rigorosamente in piedi, ovviamente. Migliaia di minigonne, calze a rete, tacchi a spillo. E nemmeno un'italiana. Le ragazze bianche vengono dall'Europa dell'Est. La maggior parte però arriva dall'Africa<sup>30</sup>.

The reflections proposed in this essay are intended to develop into a comparative analysis of literary and visual works on new slaveries in Britain and Italy, produced in English and in Italian. My overall impression is that artistic products on new slaveries in Italy are still few and far between, if compared to Britain. This may be accounted for by the lack of a tradition, in more than one sense. In post-war years, the so-called Windrush Generation marked the birth of Black Britain and its cultural products, which have involved more than one generation and a great many seminal cultural expressions that changed the country radically; the fact that many anglophone artists, whatever their origins, have recently expressed themselves on new slaveries is evidence of this. I wonder whether an analogous terrain can be found in Italy, and I feel extremely curious about what has been produced (or can be produced) in Italian, on Italian new slaveries, as a consequence. But I leave the question open, for myself and others to study.

<sup>30</sup> F. GATTI, *Bilal*, p. 390. In the following pages (391-401), Gatti traces a comparison with the undocumented men lining the streets at dawn (just abandoned by the prostitutes) in order to be recruited on building sites, on the border between Italy and Switzerland.